

No title, yet.

Marco Abate

Alex touched the computer screen, twice. It couldn't be right. He touched himself, and then the screen, again. It couldn't be, right?

It had been a hectic day, as usual. Alex stretched, enjoying the feeling of each vertebra saying goodbye to the often too close bond it had with its neighbors. It has been nice, but it has to end, sorry; squeeze you tomorrow. The server went down in the morning, and then again in the afternoon, without any apparent reason. That's a server for you. It put out a terse notice "Sorry, went to buy cigarettes, back soon" and then crashed. An instant later (or possibly before, Alex memory refused to be precise on this) all the phones in the office started ringing. Laura — Alex's office-mate — claimed that even phones in the corridor started ringing at the same time, but Alex had been unable to confirm or disprove the claim. "The server crashed", Laura observed, without raising her eyes from the screen of her laptop. She was not connected to the server; or at least, not visibly. She had always been a strong supporter of wireless connections, while Alex preferred the rougher directness of an Ethernet cable. It made him feel more... well, connected. It was a difference reflected in their physical appearances too; Alex more corporeal, Laura a will-of-the-wisp. Which meant that Alex was starting to develop a paunch that he could do without, while Laura was short (well, that's not her fault) and too thin for her own sake. And always with shades. She wore them even at work, in front of her many computer screens (too brilliant and contrasted for Alex's tastes, but he didn't wear shades, so how could he judge?), and in the evenings, at least when she took her car to

go home after work. She might even wear them at the movies, as far as Alex knew. He had never brought her to a movie, and didn't plan to, but as far as he knew she might. Alex was hard pressed to remember the color of her eyes, even though they had worked together in the same office for the last year or so; it was easier to know the color of her knickers. And this was not a figure of speech; Laura often wore low-cut trousers (coordinated with the shades, of course) and high-cut T-shirts (monochromatic, and no bra; not that she had that much to put into one, but anyway Alex could not avoid noticing it), leaving open the possibility of catching a glimpse of her slips when she walked or bended. Last week they were standard plain sensible white; but the week before they were a tantalizing transparent green, leaving Alex wondering. At one point he even thought about taking notes on the colors of Laura's knickers, looking for patterns and repetitions, cycles of fabric or exceptions of tonalities that might say something important about the inner life of his office-mate; but then he decided it was too much work. And yet, he still wondered about that transparent green...

The phones were still ringing, and Laura didn't seem to bother answering. "Somebody has to do all the work around here", Alex muttered, knowing very well that most of the time the "somebody" was Laura; he was the new guy in the office, after all, he had to learn the ropes yet, or so he kept repeating (mostly to himself) since he got this job.

"Hello?", Alex said to silence at least one phone. After picking it up, of course, he knew how to use phones, he was a computer geek.

"What in the blaze happened to the server and what are you doing about it?"

It was the department head, of course. Right on cue. His must have been the call ringing an instant before the server crashed.

"Don't worry, John, we are looking into it, and it'll be up in no time."

"You already said that this morning, and here we are again!"

“But this morning it did go up after all, right?”

Alex knew that this wouldn't stop the department head complaining, but he cannot help himself. It had always been like that, between him and John, since the first time he met the department head. And his body too – an imposing body, at that. Both John's body and the department body (about seventy people, at last count). It is sort of funny that a department might have both a head and a body, often going in different directions, and even oftener not on speaking terms with each other, but Alex didn't think that John would have taken lightly such a remark. John didn't take anything lightly; he probably erased the word from his brain using some sort of brainwashing machine (with a transparent lid where you could see all the brain goo twirling and whirling around) when he passed the one hundred kilos mark. And this must have been a very long while ago; Alex even suspected that John was born like that (young mothers chirping together, comparing the newborns and competing without mercy “Oh, Mrs. Winter, my little beauty, just over four kilos, an ideal weight...” “Oh, Mrs. Summer, would you look at him? Only two kilos and six hundred grams, and yet his little hands are so perfect... and yours, Mrs. John?” “Oh, my little beauty, he is a little wonder, just a bit on the heavy side, slightly over one hundred kilos...” Dumbo's ears are flapping again). That would have been a birth worth watching. Well, yes, most births were worth watching in Alex's opinion, but this in particular...

“I've been clear, Alex? And that holds for Laura too!”

“No sweat, John, everything is under control”.

“Is it?” asked Laura, this time raising her eyes (shaded by the shades) from the laptop screen after Alex replaced the phone.

“You tell me,” answered Alex, “you're the computer genius around here. I'm the geek, you the genius, remember?”

Laura didn't bother answering, but Alex knew she liked the comment. She was good; she knew it, and liked to be remembered of it. She had an uncanny way of pinpointing troubles and coming up with solutions that Alex couldn't have imagined in his wildest dreams (mostly because his wildest dreams were not about computers. Tantalizing green knickers, maybe, but computers... no. Whereas Laura...). But it was ok by him; Laura solved problems and Alex answered phones. An efficient sharing of duties.

They worked on the server most of the afternoon. There didn't seem to be anything specifically wrong; but it kept complaining that he wanted more cigarettes and could they please let it go to buy them? At one point they even opened it. Physically. They raised its cover and looked into its innards. Alex wasn't sure about it, but Laura insisted. He always felt a sort of attraction/repulsion toward the hardware of computers. Opening one was like being in a communal shower after a PhysEd class, looking (no, not looking! He wasn't supposed to look! But he cannot help being there, and closing his eyes seemed a bit silly) at his friends naked. It felt... improper. His friends were always dressed, what they wore defined them as much as their musical tastes or their stale jokes. They weren't supposed to be naked in front of him; it just wasn't right. The girls' communal shower was another matter, he would have killed to be there. Walking among their beautiful young bodies (in his imagination, even Matilda's naked body was beautiful), basking in the warm glow of the feminine mystery unveiled at last, collecting pubic hair cased in bars of soap, his smile answering dozens of body smiles (Alex strongly believed that the naked torso of a woman was made to look like – nipples, navel, pubis – a smiling face). But he was stuck in the boys' communal shower, naked and uncomfortable, eyes fixed on the shower in an unintentional Hitchcock reprise. Anyway, seeing the inside of a computer made him feeling the same. He was supposed to interact with it (with him) in the proper, gentlemanly way, not looking at its gall-bladder. He wondered whether a com-

puter, under its case, hid a penis, or a vagina. He wondered whether Laura thought of her computer as a she or a he. He wondered what would happen if a spider made his nest inside a hard disk. Or inside his chest. Or inside Laura's chest. He decided he'd better concentrate on the task at hand, helping Laura to close (at last!) the server.

Maybe it was the physical massage, maybe that bit of clever programming Laura did, or maybe even the new setting of a couple of parameters he suggested (he wasn't that useless, actually); the server got back from its cigarettes hunting, the phones stopped ringing, the world resumed rotating around the sun at its usual pace, and the workday reached its untimely (too late, as usual) end. "Good job," threw Laura at him before leaving, shades ready to defeat the night. He grunted something in response, but he was pleased. She was a good co-worker; they clicked together right. A vertebrae stretching moment, and then back home; he deserved a bit of site-seeing, tonight.

She was there. Waiting. Tirelessly. Open, opening for him. But she was here too. Close. Closing on him. He wanted to escape. To be with her. To be elsewhere, her. Glimpses of shadows revealed. He touched himself again, twice. She touched him too, twice. There. Here. It cannot be, right?

The site. It had a proper www.verylongblahblahblah.com name, but the verylongblahblah part of it was really (on purpose?) too long, and so everybody called it the site. Well, almost everybody; somebody called it the sITe, which Alex thought was sort of cute, but since he couldn't figure out what IT might stand for (besides, well, "it"), he refrained himself and remained inside the no-capitals majority.

There was a community, around the site. A mostly silent community; no chat, no e-mails, that wasn't the point, you could get those anywhere on the web. What you could do, on the site, was upload files, any kind (pictures, movies, sounds, software, garbage), and then merge them using sophisticated tools. Very sophisticated. Alex saw a picture of a bus stop, seven in the morning, cloudy day, depressed people waiting, became a post-apocalyptic Korean dance where Alec Baldwin in the role of the bus run over a plasma giant singing Bowdlerian hymns while the depressed people, still depressed, nod asynchronously.

Alex stumbled upon the site one month or so ago, and he became addicted almost immediately. It wasn't Alec Baldwin, nor possibly any other single material on the site (even though that movie starring Jessica Alba as a Russian anchorwoman reading the 12 pm news dressed only in a bar code and a glass of clear vodka... a bit crude, perhaps, but who was he to complain?); it was the staggering amount of possibilities, the vitality of all of it, the coming back finding every time something new and exciting and something already known but with new layers making it even more exciting...

He began his exploration of the site just looking around, finding his way in the intricate classification system, mixing together raw material, finished products and merging programs (they had to be mixed together: everything was always in flux, beautifully treated images became the starting point for an excruciating sound system added to a psychedelic software tool, which in turn was later given a visual form as a sequence of hypnotically varying colored strips). Then he started experimenting with the material already available on the site. One of his most successful experiments was a short polka dance combining a close-up of a faraway galaxy and a close-up of a (not shaved) female armpit. It was so successful that a couple of days later he discovered it in the background of the bus stop; and so he found the courage to

erase Alec Baldwin from the clip replacing him with Jessica Alba in transparent green knickers. Much better.

But he never uploaded original material on the site, at least not until tonight. His pictures were lame, his music commonplace, the site had software much better any program he could write. But he wanted to be part of that community; and he felt he needed to upload something of his to be so. And, at last, he had an idea. Not that original, perhaps, but not trivial either; and he wished to see how the community would use it. And even if they didn't like it (sometimes there was material uploaded in the site that nobody used), he wanted to see himself as he couldn't otherwise.

The computer was ready, screen on. He experimented shutting off all the lights in the room, but it was too dark for the webcam to work properly. He then fetched the bedlight from the bedroom, removed the lampshade, and put it on the floor, tilted and supported by a couple of books. Better, but not enough. The main light was a no go; it'd kill all the shadows. Then he remembered an old electric torch, a left-over from his camping days; he should also have new batteries somewhere. The webcam in one hand, the torch in the other; it could work.

Alex started undressing. He toyed with the idea of shooting the undressing too, but then rejected the idea, because it was beside the point. The point was recording his body from perspectives he couldn't usually see. From the back; from below; from above; from points of view a mirror didn't usually offer. He wanted to see him as a lover could, and a pretty thorough lover at that. He was naked, now. He collected his clothes, and put them in a carefully arranged pile in a corner of the room. He felt a bit cold, but not too much (don't do this in winter, kids). He put one foot on one side of the bedlight, the other on the other side. His cock looked strange, lighted from below. Alex was not circumcised, and he liked it better this way. He read somewhere that in the sixties almost 95 per cent of American men was circumcised,

and only recently the percentage was decreasing. This meant that most of the American women had never seen an uncircumcised penis. He lowered his foreskin, freeing the glans. He was not used to see it in this way; even when masturbating, he preferred to let the skin slid up and down over the glans without uncovering it completely. Only when making love he noticed that the glans had the tendency to get completely out of its skin protection – but then, in those moments he had much more interesting things to see and much more pressing things to do to bother with that. No woman ever commented on it, either. Well, maybe one did; but Alex thought it was because it was her first time, and so maybe it would have looked strange to her anyway. But it was Alex's first time too, and thus maybe he misconstrued her remark, maybe she already saw other (circumcised) cocks before, and Alex was just too pre-occupied with everything else to notice such subtleties; she found it strange but she liked it anyway, and so everything worked out ok (well, sort of, but the first time is never perfect, romance novels notwithstanding). He lost track of her. Juliet. A summer fling, too intense and too short. Promises to write, always postponed. Alex had never been that good in writing letters, not even e-mails. And life went on, bringing other women (not that many, to tell the truth), and none of them commented on the shape of his cock. He wondered whether Laura had ever seen a not circumcised cock, or whether she might be interested in seeing one. He could try to use it as an unconventional pick-up line: "Hey, interested in seeing an uncircumcised penis? It's uncommon and wonderful to play with, you know?" No, it wouldn't work. And anyway, this was not the moment for getting an erection; it was not supposed to be that kind of movie. At least, not this time.

Alex carefully covered again his glans, and then picked up the electric torch. It was time to begin. He decided to start with his back. He crouched in front of the webcam on his desk, so that he could record the back of his neck, lighting it first from the left and then from the

right with the torch. Then, keeping the torch with his right hand pointed at his back, he began sliding up slowly, until the webcam was pointing just below his ass. He experimented moving the light and contracting and relaxing the muscles in his back, hoping to get interesting shadows. He opened his buttocks with his left hand, and then moved forward and backward his middle section. Then he jumped, to get a glimpse of the back of his legs.

To shoot from below, he put the webcam on the floor beside the bedlight, and then he crouched over it. He oscillated back and forth, first keeping the torch fixed and then moving it from left to right with the same rhythm. He took the webcam in his hand and put it between his legs; then, slowly, he moved it forward, keeping it pointed toward himself, raising it carefully to record his cock, his navel, his breast, up to his mouth where, lighting it from below, he stuck out his tongue and made a face to the webcam.

Alex went on for most of an hour and then, without even replaying it, uploaded the movie to the site.

“I m here,” she said.

“Do you want to come and see a movie, tonight?”

“What?”

“Well, even if you don’t, you might at least pretend to be flattered by my offer...”

“No, I didn’t mean...”

“Well, don’t worry. It was just that a friend of mine got two tickets for the Matrix trilogy, all three movies together tonight at the Embassy, and then she got sick, and I thought, but if you can’t or won’t...”

“No, I do... ”

“I can always go alone, you know, or find somebody else...”

“NO! I mean, yes, you could, but it is not necessary, I’d like to come, thank you, it was just sort of unexpected...”

Actually, that wasn’t completely true. Laura had been fidgeting the whole day; it was clear that something was in her mind waiting to get out, and, as it often happens, it came out all of a sudden only in the late afternoon, when Alex thought he would never find out what was worrying her. He had noticed that she was wearing black slips, but the glimpse he had was not enough to decide whether they were of the plain-like-white-only-a-different-color type or of the slim-and-sexy kind. And anyway she might have been worrying about her cat, if she had one, or about buying another pair of shades, or about world hunger. Maybe worrying about world hunger made her feel slim-and-sexy, or made her feel the need to feel slim-and-sexy. Or at least slim; the sexy part needed somebody else, and, as far as Alex knew, there was no significant other in Laura’s life. But, to be honest, he didn’t know that much about Laura’s life, and black slips might just mean that she was in a Matrix mood. She wanted to share her Matrix mood with him. That was surprising, but in a pleasant way. He didn’t expect the invitation, and he didn’t expect to like so much the idea.

“So, I’ll see you in front of the Embassy at seven pm?”

“You got it, girl.”

Laura left, shades smiling oh so softly. It was just after five. Alex needed about an hour to get home, take a shower and a bite of something. This left him about half an hour to check the site. He usually refrained himself from exploring it at work, but he just couldn’t wait to see whether somebody had already noticed his file. He originally planned to surf the site this evening at his leisure, but the unexpected change of program required emergency measures. He just couldn’t wait.

Feeling a bit nervous, instinctively checking whether the office door was closed, he typed the address of the site and went to the search page. This was another feature of the site. There were no personal pages; the uploaded files were classified according to whimsical keywords decided by the site administrators and/or other users. There even was the keyword “unclassified”, attributed to those files nobody deemed interesting enough to assign a keyword to. Having his own file classified as “unclassified” was the worst fear Alex had. With the search page open in front of him, he froze. Come on, of course his file would be unclassified. Who else could be interested in a close view of his not anymore that athletic body? Not even him would be. (A close recognition of Laura’s body would be another matter, now that he thought of it.) It had been a stupid idea. Everybody on the site would be making fun of him, by now, even without knowing who he was. No, not even that; to make fun of him they should have seen his file, and they didn’t. He was sure of that. He was just ignored, he didn’t exist, he could never be a part of such a wonderful community. He was a loser, a whiner with a paunch, a...

Enough. He was afraid, sure, but he was man enough (the movie proved at least that; he got the beginning of a boner toward the end, he couldn’t help it) to survive this trial. He wouldn’t look under ‘unclassified’; he would first try other keywords. And if they didn’t work... he’d deal with that. ‘Body’ was a definite possibility; but too vague. Even ‘male body’ would produce thousands of files (though not as many as ‘female body’ would); he needed something more specific. What did he try to show in his movie? ‘Male body exploration’? Could be. He typed it in the search box and, quivering, pressed return. A few hundreds hits. Alex spent a few minutes checking them all, but his file wasn’t there. Shit. Should he try ‘unclassified’? No, not yet. Neo wouldn’t give up so easily. What was he trying to do with his movie? He wanted to see his body as a lover could. Did he want to show his body to any number of potential cy-

bernetic lovers? Could be, but it wasn't for somebody else, at least that wasn't his main reason; it was something he did for himself, chiefly. He typed 'see my body as a lover could', without thinking about it, and pressed return. Two hits. And the first one was his file! So somebody already downloaded it and understood it! Even better, the flag signaling that the file had been manipulated was on: not only somebody examined it, but that somebody thought it was interesting enough to use! Wow... Alex didn't know whether he was more flattered or thrilled; in both cases, he wanted to see right now what s/he did with his file.

The phone rang.

It'd stop, Alex was sure. Or it'll be Laura, saying that she changed her mind, that she didn't want to go to a movie with a computer geek thrilled because somebody tinkered with a kinky movie of his body, and he didn't want to answer such a call. Alex tried to will the phone to be silent.

The phone instead kept ringing, as telephones are often wont to do.

Alex couldn't afford to see his movie with this obnoxious noise going on. He picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Alex, this is John. Is Laura there?"

"No, she left almost half an hour ago, as you might know. Eight-to-five, remember?"

"That's unfortunate. You'll do, then."

"No, I won't. I'm leaving soon too."

"This is urgent."

"My leaving is too."

"Alex, somebody tried to hack into the system today."

"How do you..."

“You must reconfigure the department’s firewall to prevent such occurrences.”

“*Reconfigure the department s firewall?* That’s a half-day work!”

“Then you’d better start right now. I’ll forward you the new specs immediately.”

“Stop it! It five thirty pm, it’s Friday evening, I got to leave now and I shouldn’t be here anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter. This is an emergency.”

“John, somebody tries to hack into our system almost every day, and the system is well protected as it is. Even if they could break the firewall — and I don’t believe they could — they couldn’t get to usernames, passwords or any other sensitive data. Laura added a second shield of protection, and I assure you that what Laura put in place, nobody can displace.”

“As much as I trust Laura’s judgment in these matters, I still think that a reconfiguration of the firewall is in order.”

“John, look, I just can’t do it right now.”

“Well, you have to find a way to.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You don’t want to know what would happen then.”

“Come on, John, it’s Friday evening...”

“Yes, I know what day of the week is, thank you.”

Alex took a deep breath. Why did they elect him as department’s head? So he could put all his weight on everybody else’s life?

“John, listen, I cannot do a complete reconfiguration of the firewall without Laura’s assistance. I’d have to change a few settings that can be tinkered with only with her privileges. Let’s do it this way: I’ll now put a second shield of protection around all sensitive data, so that

we can sleep safe and sound during the week-end, and Monday we shall reconfigure the firewall first thing in the morning.”

“No, Monday is too late. You should do it tomorrow.”

“John, tomorrow is Saturday!”

“As already said, I do know that.”

“And I don’t want to know what happens if I don’t comply.”

“That’s right.”

“Ok, I surrender. Tomorrow morning I’ll be here, and I’ll try and get Laura too. But it’s overtime, and we should be paid accordingly.”

“Agreed. I’ll forward you the new specs right now.”

Alex replaced the phone and looked longingly to the computer screen. No time to check his file, now; he might have to skip his shower or a bite or both to be on time at the Embassy (and he won’t be late, oh no). He saved the file to his computer (somebody else could modify it later on, and he wanted to have all versions), and started working on a second shield. Even if it was just a perfunctory shield (it wasn’t yet born the hacker able to bypass Laura’s protections), it needed some time to be set up, and he was already late.

“Remember, the Matrix. Our first time.”



“There is nothing really new or original in these movies, you know. The cyberpunk science-fiction community worked the whole concept of living inside a virtual reality to dead.”

“But from a visual point of view it is stunning! The bullet-time, for instance...”

“It is very well done, I concede you that, but again it is mostly derivative. The bullet-time gimmick comes out from Hong Kong action movies, and they possibly got it from Peckinpah...”

“I didn’t know you were such a movie bluff, Laura.”

“I’m not; I just read things around, that’s all.”

“What about the Smiths, then? Derivative too?”

“Computer programs becoming sentient, taking up a life of their own and replicating themselves all over the place? You bet! That was stale even before the cyberpunk movement started...”

“They do represent quite well something we both fear and are attracted to, though. Did you notice that in the audience there were almost as many people dressed as Smith as people dressed as Neo?”

“Yep. I even saw a female Smith, which is something I sort of missed in the trilogy.”

“Let me try to summarize what I’ve understood of your opinion, if I might be so bold.”

“Please, do.”

“You think that the story material is just a regurgitated mixture of already done-to-death notions.”

“I would have said half-digested, but that’s about it.”

“You think that the visual stuff is just hyper-hollywoodized recast of ideas who were brilliant only when first thought of – by somebody else.”

“Correct.”

“Then why in the hell did you want to go and see it?”

“Because I love it!”

“But...”

“And I sort of thought you would like it too.”

They were now in front of her house. They walked all the way from the movie theater; it was a warm June night, the neighborhood was safe, less cars around meant they could talk smoothly and softly, listening to each other and sort of expecting to hear nightingales which weren't there but lingered anyway in the night air – together with some more concrete bats which were ok too.

They were in front of her house, now, and this had always been a difficult moment for Alex. The good-bye moment, dreaded by all teen-agers and most grown-up men. What to say, what to do, when. It always turned out wrong – at least when played out in advance in his mind. And while Alex rehearsed in his mind those too many failed approaches, the moment abruptly went. And the woman he was with usually did too.

But this time, Alex knew exactly what to do, without thinking about it. Not too much, at least.

“Laura...”

“Yes?”

“May I ask you a sort of an unusual thing?”

“You got me intrigued. Go ahead.”

“But if you won't want to, just forget I asked, I don't...”

“Ask, Alex, it's ok.”

“May I see your eyes?”

There might have been an instant of hesitation, there, while Laura took off her shades. She had kept them on during the movies, and walking in the night. She picked them up with just two fingers of her right hand and let them slide along her nose, freeing the left ear at the

last possible moment. Head down, she stayed still; Alex waited. Then she raised her face, and looked at him straight on, defiant and scared.

“They’re beautiful, Laura.”

They were. Large, deep brown the left one, with just a hint of red along the brim. As large, and red and white the right one. An albino eye, alive and vibrant in an outworldish way, a fawn from Mars, as beautiful as the brown and red and white starry and street-lamped night was.

“You are beautiful, all colors of you.”

Alex lightly kissed her left eye, and then, smoothly and softly, the naked right one. Laura tensed, waiting for the blow to come. But it didn’t, and she didn’t move away, and Alex kept caressing and kissing her face, murmuring reassuring nonsenses which weren’t meant to be actually understood, the mere sound conveying the whole meaning to Laura, starting now slowly to respond, tentatively touching Alex’s face with just the point of her fingers, tracing his nape and his cheeks, moving her lips toward his mouth, slow, still scared and yet letting go, kissing him and being kissed, strongly, hungrily, Alex answering with the same unexpected urge, moving her toward the door and yet letting her guide him through it and through the embarrassing moment of not finding the keys or the lock or both, shedding clothes along the unexplored way toward her bedroom, falling laughing together onto the bed where even a stray elbow into a kidney was a love gesture.

“Would you prefer to turn off the lights, Alex?”

“No, no, I want to see all of you, all your beauty in front of me, all of it...”

Her breasts were small, pink-brown eyes smiling by themselves, nipples hard and responding under Alex’s caresses, little shivers going through them and Laura’s body too like small winks of appreciation. Her stomach was flat and elastic, yielding slightly and then reas-

serting itself when Alex kissed it. Her navel a little depression, which Alex started exploring with the tip of his tongue, following every single fold of the birth scar, one by one. Alex loved navels. They fascinated him; they were the only remaining sign of the deep physical connection between a mother and her child. A door onto the interior of the body, once open to let life go through, now closed. He liked to lick them, to nip and taste them, to explore them knocking at life's door. Juliet had one of the rarer protruding kind, a small piece of the umbilical chord left there because of the way it was tied or cut or whatever at birth, a vestigial souvenir of the liquid pre-birth life. Alex used to bite it, delicately or more firmly if Juliet started to be too much tickled, imagining himself connected to her birth, part of the umbilical link, blood and air and nutrients and life going through him into her, into her stomach so flat and empty and ready to be filled, just waiting to be opened and explored and kissed and made new again, returning to its original ways, perfect life pouring into it through the heavenly navel gate, asking Alex to open it again, to let it free.

“Alex...”

“Mmm...”

“I like foreplay as any other woman, but you might as well go lower now...”

Alex obliged. They were slim-and-sexy.

She kept looking at him, here and there, opening here and closing on him there, and the difference was fading away oh so fast oh so fast oh so...

Saturday morning was understandably awkward. Having to go back to the usual routine helped, and made things worse. It gave them something to talk about, underlining how many things had to be left unsaid. Laura of course put her shades on again, a totally reflecting

model with red undertones. Alex believed she had to have a whole collection of them, and wondered whether she matched them to her underwear too, but decided that was a question he'd better not ask for the time being. John was popping in their office every now and again, making popping noises proportioned to his size, distracting them from completing the work he wanted them doing, and effectively preventing Alex from removing those shades to kiss again and again those wonderful eyes. Laura's assessment of the situation was exactly the same as Alex's: there was no need to reconfigure the department's firewall, it was working just fine as it was. But, as the rest of the department had painfully learned, there was no point in trying to deflect John from his self-appointed course, and Alex and Laura didn't even bother. They were paid overtime for doing something useless, so better do it as painlessly and as fast as possible.

They needed most of a morning to get around it, but they eventually did, and a satisfied John gave them leave to leave. But leaving was even more awkward; they ended up exchanging a fast kiss and a stronger promise to get together in the evening, for a dinner or a movie or, well, something else. The kiss was fast but the promise was there; they both knew they were looking forward to the evening, wherever it would take them.

Alex went home and, as he did when he needed figuring something out, started cooking. He didn't think of himself as a good cook, and indeed he didn't dare to invite Laura home, at least not yet, but he enjoyed the physical manipulation needed to get from raw ingredients to something edible, and it soothed him, helped him to put things in perspective. Too many good news in too short a time; he needed some serious cooking, and he got a large trout out of the refrigerator. Cleaning a fish put Alex in touch with his primordial self. He used the appropriate tools to remove the flakes, and the appropriate knife to cut the downside of the fish, but after that he had to put his own fingers into its interior to remove the innards. A stomach still half

full, a heart with black blood still clinging to it, alien looking gills still remembering how to filter oxygen from plain water, a sac apparently containing thousands of eggs (it was a she-trout), and some other strangely colored fleshy pieces he didn't recognize and that might not have any human equivalent. He got all out just using his fingers, as his progenitors already did thousands of years ago. He also always felt the urge to bite the raw fish, as they surely did, but he never actually tried. The feel of the blood on his hands was enough to remember him that he was going to eat a once-living thing, something the sanitized version of cooking where you start with some sort of clean and almost abstract material called "fish" or "chicken" or whatever having no resemblance at all with the original animal hoped to hid. Alex, even though he had no vegetarian instincts at all, understood the reasons underlying sanitized cooking, but felt important to sometimes remind himself how close he still was to the way his ancestors lived. It gave him an anchor, a fixed point from which examine his own feelings.

Which were turbulent enough. Until yesterday (even yesterday evening, to be precise) he thought that finding a lover was completely out of the range of present possibilities for him. Furthermore, discovering how strong his feelings for Laura were had been a complete surprise. Now he just wanted to be with her again, and just keep exploring and exploring her body as only a lover could, while she did the same with his body. And possibly somebody else did with the movie he uploaded to the site. He considered telling Laura all about it, but he somehow felt ashamed, and shy, and protective, and a lot of other more confused things all rolled up together. Moreover, he still had this burning curiosity, this need of seeing what the site community did with his movie.

He rushed through his meal (a bit overcooked, he had to admit), and turned on his computer. A quick glance showed him that nobody else had modified his file since he checked the day before, and so he immediately run the version he already downloaded.

It was a big let down. Alex didn't know what he was expecting, but this was really lame. Whoever did it showed no imagination. He (or she) just put here and there in the background characters taken by the Matrix movies (ok, that was a peculiar coincidence, but stranger things happened, and the Matrix iconography had a tendency of appearing a bit too often in the site). A few Neos, a number of Smiths, even one Oracle. They were not doing anything in particular; they just stayed there looking, sometimes toward Alex's body, more often elsewhere.

Alex didn't understand it. It was too lame. To get through all the work (well, not that much work, but still) needed to modify the file just to paste up still images in the background... he didn't get it, it wasn't the sort of things he came to expect from the site community. There also was another unusual detail. The size of his file had increased a lot, much more than what he would have expected after such a basic modification. Furthermore, the other file he got from his search was huge too, hundreds of megabytes, even though it was listed as an (as yet) unmodified ordinary picture file. Posted just a few seconds after his file was modified, and that couldn't be a coincidence.

It wasn't a let down as big as the previous one, but close. The file was a naked picture of Jessica Alba, legs spread wide open. More precisely, it was a naked picture of some girl, with Jessica Alba's face pasted over. Not very well done either, the cut line on the neck was clear enough just after a single zooming in. And two zoomings already showed the pixels, as in a low resolution image. Which didn't make sense, considering the file size. And the chosen body didn't make sense either; it wasn't ugly (that no female body could be ugly was one of Alex's firmest opinion), but it wasn't of cover girl level, and definitely not comparable to Jessica Alba's original body.

Unless it was the body of whoever posted the image, with the face changed to protect her (no doubt about the sex here) anonymity. Well, if she wanted her body to be seen as only a lover could ordinarily see it, Alex was only too happy to comply.

The examination of her breasts didn't reveal anything worth noticing. They were larger than Laura's, but less firm and slightly pear-shaped; a couple of zooming was enough to blur the nipples in a mesh of unappetizing pixels. Alex didn't even tried to zoom on the navel; he just wasn't interested in pictures of navels, only in the real thing. The pubis was fully haired, of a pleasant light brown color. The legs were spread wide open, offering a good view of the genitals; Alex zoomed in.

And zoomed in. And zoomed in. The resolution was incredibly good. He got a life-size image, and then a much-larger-than-life image, and yet all the details were still crispy and perfectly rendered. He could see any single hair, follow the delicate curves of the flesh around a surprisingly pink clitoris, trace the harmonic folding and unfolding of the labia no painter had ever been able to reproduce, all leading him toward the entrancing opening of the vagina. He zoomed again, and he could see each single drop of wet secretion surrounding the entrance into her mystery, taunting him to see more. And he zoomed in, and in, until the opening filled the whole screen, still perfectly detailed, Eve's cave black with a few red promises of a treasure yet to be found. Alex kept zooming in, and the red shadows resolved themselves in letters, written on the wall of Eve's cave: *Come with(in) me*. And four groups of three digits, the IP address of a web site.